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POLITICS AND PREACHING: CHIEFLY 1
CONVERTS TO THE NAZARETHA CHURCH, 2
OBEDIENT SUBJECTS, AND SERMON 3
PERFORMANCE IN SOUTH AFRICA* 4

BY JOEL CABRITA 5
University of Cambridge 6

ABSTRACT: Twentieth-century Natal and Zululand chiefs' conversions to the 7
Nazaretha Church allowed them to craft new narratives of political legitimacy 8
and perform them to their subjects. The well-established praising tradition of 9
nineteenth- and twentieth-century Zulu political culture had been an important 10
narrative practice for legitimating chiefs; throughout the twentieth century, the 11
erosion of chiefly power corresponded with a decline in chiefly praise poems. 12
During this same period, however, new narrative occasions for chiefs seeking 13
to legitimate their power arose in Nazaretha sermon performance. Chiefs used 14
their conversion testimonies to narrate themselves as divinely appointed to their 15
subjects. An alliance between the Nazaretha Church and KwaZulu chiefs of the 16
last hundred years meant that the Church could position itself as an institution of 17
national stature, and chiefs told stories that exhorted unruly subjects to obedience 18
as a spiritual virtue. 19

KEY WORDS: South Africa, religion, chieftaincy. 20

IN October 2008, Minister Mkhwanazi of the South African Nazaretha 21
Church delivered a sermon to Nazaretha believers in his home region, 22
describing the conversion of his grandfather, the Mkhwanazi chief, to the 23
Church in the early 1930s.¹ But first the Minister recounted to the listening 24
congregation how his chiefly grandfather had initially banned the prophetic 25
founder of the Church, Isaiah Shembe, from his territory. He related the 26
rivalry between chief and prophet, recounting how his grandfather said: 27
'How big is he, he who is worshipped by all these people? Because we the 28
abaMkhwanazi are the ones who are chiefs in this area! Now how come this 29
person is followed by all my people?' 30

After one of Isaiah's ministers was accused of sexual relations with a young 31
female convert, Chief Mkhwanazi and the local magistrate had Isaiah jailed. 32
But Isaiah miraculously escaped and, in retaliation for the chief's enmity, 33
caused drought to descend upon Mkhwanazi land. Eventually the chief 34
relented, realizing Isaiah's superior powers. In return, Minister Mkhwanazi 35

* My thanks to Derek Peterson and Paul la Hausse De Lalouviere for their useful
comments on earlier drafts of this article, as well as to the anonymous readers of this
journal. I am grateful to the Henry Martyn Centre, University of Cambridge, for an
opportunity to present this research in its early stages.

¹ Minister Mkhwanazi, sermon given at Estcourt Temple, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 Oct.
2008. I am grateful for the extensive help of Nkosinathi Sithole in translating this sermon
and others cited in the course of this article.

concluded to the listening congregation, Isaiah blessed his grandfather, Chief Mkhwanazi, and granted him many children with which to continue the flourishing of his chiefly lineage. The minister finished his sermon by enumerating his own 56 grandchildren, proof of the continued blessing of Shembe upon the Mkhwanazi royal house. The minister's preaching performance affirmed the moral legitimacy of the royal household – of which he was himself a member – to the listening congregation, many of them Mkhwanazi subjects.

Over the past hundred years, chiefly converts to the Nazaretha Church have used disciplines of preaching to mobilize loyal constituencies. Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, chiefs struggled to assert their authority over recalcitrant subjects, with the performance of praise poems being one device that they used to summon up popular loyalty. Chiefly converts within the Nazaretha Church drew upon a new narrative resource. They told stories that described their encounters with the Shembe leaders of the Church, and these stories were related by chiefly elites to assembled gatherings of Nazaretha believers in their own wards. Chiefs narrated to their subjects how their political rule was divinely established, and recounted stories of divine punishment for disobedient subjects. They instructed and exhorted their constituencies into submission to their rule, not only as a secular obligation but also as a spiritual virtue. For chiefs, their conversion offered an opportunity to reconstitute their patriotic subjects into communities of devout believers, bound by religious obligation to political governability.

The incorporation of chiefs was key to the Nazaretha Church's social vision. Isaiah Shembe was part of a turn-of-the-century flowering of African Christianity in southern Africa, one of many contemporary churchmen who sought independence from missionary control. Born in the Free State in about 1870, he moved to the Natal coast to pursue a ministry of itinerant preaching, baptizing, and, reputedly, healing. By the time of his death in 1935, he had amassed about 40,000 'Nazaretha' followers throughout Natal and Zululand, and had accumulated numerous church properties, including the headquarters, 'Ekuphakameni' (the Elevated Place), ten miles north of Durban. He was succeeded by his son, Johannes Galilee, and today the Church is led by Johannes's son, Vimbeni. Throughout the twentieth century, both Isaiah and Johannes evinced nationalist aspirations for the Church, imagining it to offer rehabilitation to the fragmented Zulu nation.² Chiefly converts were therefore important evidence of the Church's stature as a nationalist institution.

The story traditions of these chiefly converts illuminate the diverse ways in which twentieth-century South African chieftaincies legitimated their authority to their often sceptical subjects. A growing literature has discussed

² Isaiah Shembe was part of a wider contemporary interest in cultural nationalism and traditional authorities: N. Cope, 'The Zulu petit bourgeoisie and Zulu nationalism in the 1920s: origins of Inkatha', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 16:3 (1990), 431–51; S. Marks, 'Natal, the Zulu royal family and the ideology of segregation', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 4:2 (1978), 172–94; H. Bradford, 'Mass movements and the petty bourgeoisie: the social origins of ICU leadership, 1924–1929', *Journal of African History*, 25:3 (1984), 296.

the role of religion in shaping colonial and postcolonial identities, demonstrating that Christianity may play a vital role in the formation of sub-national identities.³ Studies have already demonstrated how certain Natal and Zululand chiefs allied with European mission bodies, discerning strategic advantages in access to land and education.⁴ And, in the case of the Nazaretha Church in particular, scholars have frequently commented on their alliance with chiefly power.⁵

A broader literature has highlighted how ‘the art of oratory and the art of ruling’ intertwined in southern African society.⁶ Through praise poetry, both political elites and commoners crafted and criticized power, and proposed virtuous political comportment.⁷ But, from at least the late nineteenth century, chiefly power in Natal and Zululand began to undergo severe erosion. The formalized performance of praise poetry as a means of bolstering chiefly authority and rallying local subjects declined throughout the twentieth century, although it nonetheless displayed flexibility and resilience in adapting to new social circumstances. In the same spirit of creative innovation, Natal and Zululand political authorities of the twentieth century began to make use of new narrative resources to persuade their subjects to offer them allegiance. Studies from southern Africa and elsewhere have discussed the currency of autobiography and biographical texts to propel readers into action, and to initiate new social, political, and religious

³ J. Lonsdale, ‘The moral economy of Mau Mau: wealth, poverty & civic virtue in Kikuyu political thought’, in B. Berman and J. Lonsdale (eds.), *Unhappy valley: conflict in Kenya & Africa. Book two: violence & ethnicity* (Athens, OH, 1992), 315–504, esp. 354; D. Peterson, *Creative Writing: Translation, Bookkeeping, and the Work of Imagination in Colonial Kenya* (Portsmouth, NH, 2004), 65–137.

⁴ H. Hughes, ‘Politics and society in Inanda, Natal: the Qadi under Chief Mqhawe, c.1840–1906’ (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 1996); H. Hughes, ‘Doubly elite: exploring the life of John Langalibalele Dube’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27:3 (2001), 445–58; M. Mahoney, ‘The millennium comes to Maphumulo: popular christianity in rural Natal, 1866–1906’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25:3 (1991), 375–91. Also P. Landau, *In the Realm of the Word: Language, Gender, and Christianity in a Southern African Kingdom* (Portsmouth, NH, 1995), 77–80.

⁵ B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* (London, 1961), 93–9; idem, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists* (Oxford, 1976), 168; idem, ‘Chief and prophet in Zululand and Swaziland’, in M. Fortes and G. Dieterlen (eds.), *African Systems of Thought* (Oxford, 1965), 276–91; Absolom Vilakazi, *Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society* (Johannesburg, 1986), 56–7.

⁶ E. Gunner and G. Furniss (eds.), *Power, Marginality and African Oral Literature* (Cambridge, 1995); K. Barber and P. F. de Moraes Farias (eds.), *Discourse and its Disguises: The Interpretation of African Oral Texts* (Birmingham, 1989); I. Hofmeyr, *We Spend our Years as a Tale that is Told: Oral Historical Narrative in a South African Chiefdom* (Johannesburg, 1993); E. Gunner, *Politics and Performance: Theatre, Poetry and Song in Southern Africa* (Johannesburg, 1994).

⁷ T. Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise Poems* (Oxford, 1965); L. Vail and L. White, *Power and the Praise Poem: Southern African Voices in History* (Charlottesville, 1991); E. Gunner and M. Gwala (eds.), *Musho! Zulu Popular Praises* (Johannesburg, 1994), 1–52; E. Gunner, ‘Ukubonga Nezibongo: Zulu praises and praising’ (unpublished PhD Thesis, University of London, 1984); K. Kresse, ‘Izibongo – the political art of praising: poetical socio-regulative discourse in Zulu society’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 11:2 (1998), 171–96.

communities.⁸ Nazaretha chiefly converts drew upon the autobiographical 99
 genre of the conversion narrative to relate their own journeys from 100
 degeneracy to spiritual health. As well as individual accounts of spiritual 101
 journeys, the composition and performance of chiefs' conversion stories 102
 recounted new forms of political thought to their subjects and, in doing so, 103
 transformed unruly dissidents into governable, obedient constituencies. 104

NARRATING CHIEFLY AUTHORITY

105

Political authorities of Natal and Zululand had long drawn upon storytelling 106
 to facilitate their state-building work. Zulu praise poets of the nineteenth 107
 century composed histories that described how their chiefs came to exercise 108
 their rule over everyone else; in particular, these narratives stressed chiefs' 109
 militarism and their corresponding ability to exert control over bounded 110
 territorial units and to subdue enemies. Performed at key ceremonial events 111
 such as weddings, national meetings, and chiefly inaugurations, the praises 112
 actively made claims upon subjects' loyalty to the figure of a leader, stamping 113
 a chief's right to rule upon his subjects. The chief's official praise-singer 114
 (*imbongi*) was a storyteller-cum-historian whose role it was to rally people 115
 around chiefly leaders, summoning up popular admiration by extolling their 116
 laudable characteristics and their roving ability to draw territory and subjects 117
 into their grasp.⁹ 118

Key to these chiefly narratives were idioms of mobility and militaristic 119
 conquest. Shaped by the military and political turmoil of the early nineteenth 120
 century, praise poets of this period drew upon martial images to describe 121
 how political authorities knit together their constituencies.¹⁰ This 'heroic 122
 ethic' was conveyed through references to journeying, travelling, and move- 123
 ment: chiefs would conquer opponents and claim control over territories and 124
 subjects by fearlessly traversing lands, rivers, and mountains. The praises 125
 (*izibongo*) of the early nineteenth-century Chief Zwide of the Ndwandwe 126
 described him as: 127

He who crouched over people that they might be killed ... Amongst the roads 128
 which one does he resemble? He is like the one which cuts straight across.¹¹ 129

By the start of the twentieth century, the militaristic chieftaincies 130
 celebrated by these praises had largely come to an end. After the defeat of the 131
 Zulu kingdom in 1879, chiefs' powers were curtailed by the appointment of 132
 district magistrates.¹² By the 1920s, industrialization meant that young men 133
 134

⁸ D. Peterson, 'Casting characters: autobiography and political imagination in central Kenya', *Research in African Literatures*, 37:3 (2006), 176–92; S. Miescher, "'My own life": A. K. Boakye Yiadom's autobiography: the writing and subjectivity of a Ghanaian teacher-catechist', in K. Barber (ed.), *Africa's Hidden Histories: Everyday Literacy and Making the Self* (Bloomington, 2006), 27–52.

⁹ Gunner, 'Ukubonga', 37–49; Gunner and Gwala, *Musho!*, 18. Praise poets were often influential figures within the chieftaincy, thus representing the interests of the chiefly elite. E. Gunner, 'Forgotten men: Zulu bards and praising at the time of the Zulu kings', *African Languages*, 2 (1976), 71–90. ¹⁰ Cope, *Izibongo*, 50–63.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 128–9.

¹² J. Lambert, 'Chiefship in early colonial Natal', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 21:2 (1995) 269–85.

and women left difficult conditions upon European labour farms for growing 135
opportunities in cities. Consequent generational and gender disputes were 136
a source of anxiety for early twentieth-century chiefs, exacerbated by the 137
rise of class-based political movements in the late 1920s, and in particular 138
the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union.¹³ Chiefs faced recalcitrant 139
and increasingly politicized subjects resistant to the moral legitimacy of 140
'traditional' law, and *ukuhlonipha*, a social code of respect. The European 141
Native Affairs Department viewed chiefs in Natal and Zululand as a bulwark 142
against politicized Africans, and attempted to calcify chiefly authority into 143
'traditional rule' (seen most fully in the Native Administration Act of 1927). 144
But this reduced chiefs' popularity with their subjects, as did the ascent to 145
power of headmen, or *izinduna*, who were often able to gain the popular 146
legitimacy that chiefs lacked.¹⁴ Even the relatively privileged chiefly elites of 147
Zululand (whose monopoly on cattle contrasted with commoners' reliance 148
upon migrant wage labour) found their power eroded.¹⁵ 149

In some form, the performance of chiefly praises survived into the twen- 150
tieth century.¹⁶ Despite changing social circumstances, twentieth-century 151
chiefly praises still used heroic idioms, describing control over bounded 152
territories and acquiescent subjects.¹⁷ But praises also reflected the challenges 153
that chiefs faced, including violence between wards of the same tribe, caused 154
by scarce land, and unruly youth.¹⁸ The praises of the Hlabisa chiefs 155
in Zululand commented on the attempt of their chiefs to maintain codes of 156
respect for elders amid the corrosive effects of urban migrant labour. The 157
chief is lauded in the course of his debilitating experience of drunken brawls 158
in the Witwatersrand mine compounds: 159

These Brawls will Kill Me! The drunkards sleep at the canteen.¹⁹ 160

However, despite the ability of praises to respond to new chiefly predica- 161
ments, in general the twentieth-century erosion of chiefly power cor- 162
responded with a decline in the institutional, formalized aspect of praising. 163
On the one hand, praising performances of the highest political authorities 164
continued largely unaffected: Zulu Paramount Chief Solomon kaDinuzulu 165
employed an *imbongi*, Hoye, to carry out the work of praising him full time.²⁰ 166
On the other hand, the frequency and intensity of chiefly praising practices 167
168

¹³ By and large, the majority of South African chiefs were either neutral or hostile to the activities of trade unions such as the ICU in their wards. H. Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom: The ICU in Rural South Africa, 1924–1930* (New Haven, 1987), 88–104.

¹⁴ A. MacKinnon, 'Chiefly authority, leapfrogging headmen and the political economy of Zululand, South Africa, ca. 1930–1950', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 27:3 (2001), 567–90.

¹⁵ Aran MacKinnon, 'The persistence of the cattle economy in Zululand, 1900–1950', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 33:1 (1999), 113.

¹⁶ Hofmeyr, *We Spend our Years*, 161.

¹⁷ R. Kunene, 'An analytical survey of Zulu poetry, both traditional and modern' (unpublished MA Thesis, University of Natal, 1962); Cope, *Izibongo*, 50–1.

¹⁸ J. Clegg, 'Ukubuyisa Isidumbu – bringing back the body: an examination into the ideology of violence in the Msinga and Mpofana rural locations, 1882–1944', in P. Bonner (ed.), *Working Papers in Southern African studies* (Johannesburg, 1981), II, 164–98.

¹⁹ Gunner and Gwala, *Musho!*, 132–3.

²⁰ Interview in 1921 with Royal *Imbongi* Hoye in J. Wright and C. Webb (eds.), *The James Stuart Archive* (Pietermaritzburg, 1976), I, 168–9.

abated: their praises would be performed on special occasions only, and few chiefs could afford to keep a full-time *imbongi*.²¹ By the 1970s, as Gunner observed, ‘months, sometimes years, would pass between the performance of chiefly praises’.²² The twentieth century also saw praises begin to be composed for political figures who rivalled the authority of chiefs; for example, trade unionists were publicly praised from the early twentieth century.²³

NAZARETHA ORATORY AND HIERARCHY

As did contemporary chiefs, Isaiah Shembe recognized the power of rhetoric to bolster his authority. Storytelling practices whereby early twentieth-century believers gave hagiographic accounts of Isaiah’s miraculous deeds were an important means of generating loyal piety among converts. Sabbath-day sermons, as well as mid-weekly meeting sermons, provided frequent occasions for believers to recount to each other *izindaba* (stories) about the extraordinary deeds of Shembe. In addition to these ongoing performances, there were large annual occasions. Thousands of believers undertook pilgrimages to the Church’s large biannual meetings – in July at Ekuphakameni, in January in Nhlankakazi – for several weeks of sermons, while there were meetings at various regional temples in other months. The storytellers at these events were usually senior ministers, often male. Their listening audiences were thousands of believers, who would store up the stories they heard about Shembe’s miraculous deeds – ‘put them in their bag’²⁴ – and recount them in their own local temples upon travelling home after the meeting ended. These occasions were opportunities for Nazaretha elites to garner believers’ loyalty to ‘Shembe’, ensuring that stories circulated widely through the repeated narrations of congregation members.

Many early twentieth-century chiefs could not afford to keep a full-time praise poet, and the formal performance of their praises had diminished, becoming an ‘event’ rather than a daily occurrence. By contrast, Isaiah, and later Johannes, had their own praise poets – the first was a man called Dladla – and their praises were performed daily to rouse people to morning prayer, as well as after each Sabbath-day service.²⁵ The Shembes’ praises employed similar motifs to chiefly praises, using militaristic idioms to describe evangelistic victories, and emphasizing ceaseless journeying across far-flung lands in order to gather up the ‘beautiful ones of God’, as Nazaretha believers of the period named themselves.²⁶ For example, referring to Isaiah’s missionary journeys to southern Mpondoland, the praises name him as a great, inexorable steam train: ‘Mbombela, The train bound

²¹ Gunner, ‘Ukubonga’, 130. ²² *Ibid.* ²³ Gunner and Gwala, *Musho!*, 11–18.

²⁴ N. Sithole, ‘The mediation of public and private selves in the performance of sermons and narratives of near-death experiences in the Nazarite Church’, in D. Brown (ed.), *Religion and Spirituality in South Africa: New Perspectives* (Pietermaritzburg, 2009), 260.

²⁵ Gunner, ‘Ukubonga’, 193 n. 2, 384. During the 1970s, a man named Azariah Mthiyane was one of two official *izimbongi* of Johannes Galilee. Today, Themba Masinga is the official bard of the current leader, Vimbeni Shembe.

²⁶ E. Gunner, ‘Power house, prison house: an oral genre and its use in Isaiah Shembe’s Nazareth Baptist Church’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 14:2 (1986), 204–27.

for the Pondos!’²⁷ And Johannes’s praises laud him as a spiritual warrior, 206
fighting noisily with ministers of other, rival, churches: 207

He is fighting overnight, The morning is coming. His shield clashing with those of 208
the ministers. A Noise Maker, Who Made Noise at esiNothi.²⁸ 209

As well as consolidating the power of the Shembe dynasty, Nazaretha 210
oratory was an occasion for the congregation to assert power. Preaching was a 212
highly competitive performance form, and rhetorical talents could establish a 213
speaker’s authority within local congregations. Female converts who sought 214
prestigious positions as women’s leaders (*abakhokheli*) or young girls’ leaders 215
(*abapathi*) drew upon their talents as persuasive preachers to consolidate 216
their reputations. A successful speaker skilfully employed Nazaretha 217
conventions, such as using undulating vocal cadences and exhorting audi- 218
ences to respond with rousing repetitions of ‘Amen!’ But renowned speakers 219
were also those who told the right types of stories. In preaching performance, 220
aspiring leaders related their spiritual pedigree by recounting their tales of 221
miraculous healings by one of the Shembe leaders, as well as of their own 222
evangelistic successes and spiritual triumphs. For twentieth-century chiefly 223
converts too, as we shall shortly see, preaching performance was a means to 224
craft a reputation, both within the Church and among their wider political 225
constituencies. 226

CHIEFS AND THE NAZARETHA CHURCH

227

Isaiah, and later Johannes, sought chiefly converts because of the credibility 228
that they would lend the Church as an institution of national stature. Upon 229
arriving in a new area, Isaiah first ‘reported’ to the chief, in the hope both of 230
receiving permission to work in his ward but also of gaining an influential 231
chiefly convert.²⁹ The Nazaretha Church was one of numerous contemporary 232
African churches that sought the patronage of ‘traditional’ authorities, part 233
of a wider nationalist fervour. The African Congregational Church had tried 234
to become the ‘National Church of Zululand’, seeking the close patronage of 235
the king,³⁰ while the ‘National Swazi Native Apostolic Church of South 236
Africa’ proclaimed the Swazi king, Sobhuza, their ‘Priest, Bishop, Minister 237
and President in this the Swazi Church, as he is of Royal Birth’.³¹ 238
Archbishop E. Mdlalose, who led a prominent group of Zionists in Zululand, 239
frequently ‘open(ed) important national functions’ at the royal household 240
‘by prayer and religious address’.³² A ‘prayer’ narrated by Isaiah, and scribed 241
by an anonymous follower sometime after 1920, suggests the link between 242

²⁷ M. Mpanza, ‘UShembe nobuNazaretha’ (informally published, undated text).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ E. Gunner, ‘Testimonies of dispossession and repossession: writing about the South African prophet Isaiah Shembe’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 73:3 (1984), 100.

³⁰ E. Roberts, ‘Shembe: the man and his work’ (unpublished MA thesis, University of the Witwatersrand, 1936), 167; A. Lea, *The Native Separatist Church Movement in South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1926), 46.

³¹ Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 94; Roberts, ‘Shembe’, 167.

³² Sundkler, ‘Chief and prophet’, 277.

the search for chiefly converts and the Church's nationalist credentials. 243
Isaiah proclaimed himself to be: 244

In mourning for our Nation which is dispersed ... At that time, there was no one 245
who was a chief who was of the faith of Ekuphakameni ... And now today we have 246
chiefs with us at Ekuphakameni. Should we not then believe in the new God of 247
Ekuphakameni?³³ 248

Chiefly converts also offered valuable access to land.³⁴ Chiefs' willingness 249
to host the Church upon their land was crucial. Hostile chiefs frequently 250
reported Isaiah to the Native Commissioner or Magistrate, leading to a 251
ban on Nazaretha missionary work in that area.³⁵ Black buyers struggled 252
to gain land after the 1913 Land Act and, as a religious institution 'un- 253
recognized' by the government, the Church was unable from 1937 legally 254
to obtain sites for churches and schools in the African Reserve areas.³⁶ When 255
able, a sympathetic chief would grant converts land upon which to erect a 256
temple.³⁷ 257
258

But, despite Isaiah's efforts, many chiefs viewed the Church as a threat to 259
their own diminishing control of land and subjects.³⁸ For one thing, the 260
abstentious moral disciplines of Nazaretha converts distinguished them 261
from chiefs' secular constituencies.³⁹ Nazaretha believers abstained from 262
medicine (both 'traditional' and Western), did not drink beer, smoke, eat 263
pork, or keep pigs or dogs, and espoused an ethic of extreme cleanliness.⁴⁰ 264
Furthermore, their practices of pilgrimage disregarded bounded chiefly 265
polities. Throughout the Church's year, Shembe and hundreds of itinerant 266
followers pilgrimaged to various holy sites – 'temples' – erecting temporary 267
dwellings for two weeks of preaching, baptizing, and healing. Chiefs' anxieties 268
over these strange itinerants, who treated their, already insecure, territorial 269
borders as permeable, were voiced in terms of 'disease'. In 1922, Chief 270
Mqedi, whose ward Isaiah and the Nazaretha passed through on their annual 271
pilgrimage to Mount Nhlankakazi, complained to the Ndwedwe magistrate 272

³³ 'The prayer of Shembe: remembering his nation', in I. Hexham (ed.), *The Scriptures of the amaNazaretha* (Lewiston, 1996), 63.

³⁴ Sundkler identified the land issue as the biggest reason behind Isaiah's alliance with chiefs: Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 99.

³⁵ In 1913–14, Chief Martin Luthuli of the *kholwa* community at Groutville ejected Isaiah from his ward with the help of the Stanger magistrate. Pietermaritzburg Archive Repository (hereafter NAB), CNC 96 2155/1912, Chief Native Commissioner to Inanda Magistrate, 23 July 1914; NAB, CNC 96 2155/1912, Chief Native Commissioner to Department of Native Affairs, 8 April 1915. Chief Frank Fynn of Mthwalume similarly had Isaiah ejected in 1913: I. Hexham and G.C. Oosthuizen (eds.), *The Story of Isaiah Shembe, Vol. II: Early Regional Traditions of the Acts of the Nazarites* (Lewiston, 1999), 35; NAB, CNC 96 2155/1912, Rev. Kessel to Umzinto and Port Shepstone Magistrates, 10 April 1913.

³⁶ Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 77–9.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 99.

³⁸ Shembe's contemporary and neighbour, the *kholwa* politician John Dube, commented that 'not even the tribal chiefs were ever shown such respect as that bestowed upon Shembe': John Dube, *UShembe* (Durban, 1936), 105.

³⁹ Sundkler described Zionists as a 'third race, set over against both the heathen and the Christian community': Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 95.

⁴⁰ National Archives Repository (hereafter SAB), NTS 1431, 24/214, Sgt Craddock to District Commandant, South African Police, 31 July 1922. Some members of early twentieth-century independent churches were forbidden to shake hands with non-believers in case they were soiled. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 157.

about 'the danger of infection being spread by diseased persons who have come to Shembe to be healed'.⁴¹ In 1944, Paramount Chief Mshiyeni complained that:

People come from afar whom we do not know, and say they are Messengers of God. We don't know these people ... no person should preach until he has reported himself to the Chief, who will question him and ascertain his standing and character.⁴²

Not only did pilgrims disrespect chiefs' territorial authority; female converts also transferred allegiance to Shembe as their spiritual patriarch. Early twentieth-century chiefs' diminishing authority was predicated upon obedient female subjects domiciled at home.⁴³ Isaiah's huge success in gaining female converts⁴⁴ led to many embarking upon evangelistic journeys with him, loosening patriarchs' already shaky control of the homestead economy.⁴⁵ Chief Msebenzie of the Lower Umzimkulu complained in 1915 that Isaiah drew away 'women and children (who) have gone away with these preachers to the Ixopo and Durban for two and sometimes three months at a time, without the permission of their husbands and fathers'.⁴⁶ Female converts quit their kinship affiliations and transferred loyalty to 'Shembe' as their spiritual father and husband. Women performed symbolic 'wifely acts' for him: 'the men complain that Shembe makes the women wash his feet, which they are not made to do even by their own husbands'.⁴⁷ Chief Msebenzie's headman, Sotshobo, who lost his wife and two sisters to the Church, reported that 'all Shembe's washing and mending is done at my kraal by my wife which fact goes to show the hold this man has over the women'.⁴⁸

Further, chiefs sympathetic to the Church risked the disapproval of their employer, the Native Affairs Department (NAD). The NAD viewed the Church, a body entirely free of European missionary supervision, as a threat to public order.⁴⁹ In 1939, Chief Magemegeme Dube was rebuked for permitting believers in his area to build a school for Nazaretha children upon

⁴¹ SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Chief Native Commissioner to Magistrate Ndwedwe, 18 Dec. 1922.

⁴² Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 96.

⁴³ S. Marks, 'Patriotism, patriarchy and purity', in C. Walker (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (Cape Town, 1990), 220-8.

⁴⁴ A 1921 report on Shembe estimated that 95% of his followers were female: SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Sergt Craddock to District Officer, South African Police, 10 Sept. 1921.

⁴⁵ The Zulu prophet George Khambule was ejected from a chief's ward. Khambule asserted that he aimed to 'separate people, to set a daughter at variance against her mother and the father against his son': Sundker, *Zulu Zion*, 157.

⁴⁶ NAB, CNC 2155/1912 96, Statement of Chief Msebenzi of Lower Umzimkulu Division to Magistrate Port Shepstone, 30 Sept. 1915.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ NAB, CNC 2155/1912 96, Magistrate Port Shepstone to Chief Native Commissioner, 22 Sept. 1915.

⁴⁹ Converts resisted vaccination throughout the 1920s and 1930s: SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Chief Native Commissioner to Secretary for Native Affairs, 7 Jan. 1935. Sporadic violence took place at Ekuphakameni: SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Statement of Peter Ngcobo to South African Police, 22 March 1939. In 1942, Europeans in the Nongoma district were killed, supposedly by members of the Church: SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214.

his land.⁵⁰ He was warned by the Chief Native Commissioner that, ‘as the Shembe sect was not recognized by the government, he, as a chief, would be well advised to disassociate himself entirely from the activities of that sect’.⁵¹ In the same year, Chief Ntshidi Mzimela was reprimanded by the Mthunzini Native Commissioner for allowing the Church to erect unauthorized buildings in his ward and, more generally, for not reporting its presence to him.⁵² The NAD perceived chiefs’ frequent visits to Ekuphakameni as ‘shirking’ their duty.⁵³

Despite this, by 1940 the Church boasted about 15 chiefly converts, many from the Zululand districts. For these authorities, conversion provided significant benefits. First, the Church’s espousal of Zulu ‘culture’ made it a natural ally; Isaiah and Johannes styled the Church as the repository of beleaguered Zulu ‘tradition’. In the 1970s, many chiefs aligned to Chief Buthelezi’s Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) were also members of the Church – both institutions that bolstered ‘traditional’ chiefly power.⁵⁴ Most importantly for chiefs, the Church interpreted Zulu ‘tradition’ in terms of the conservative social code of *ukuhlonipha*, or respect for seniors, elders, and political authorities. In their alliance with the Nazaretha Church, convert chiefs drew upon its high estimation of traditional authorities both to recast their own chiefly legitimacy and to fashion their subjects into constituencies knit together through bonds of spiritual fellowship. Chiefly elites made use of the Church’s rich oratory tradition to carry out this imaginative work of recasting their political authority and claiming obedience from subjects. Nazaretha leaders and laity already used preaching performance to create religious status and reputation. Chiefly converts drew upon the hierarchy-generating rhetorical traditions of the Church in order to exhort audiences of subjects to pious political obedience.

DIVINE AUTHORITIES AND LOYAL SUBJECTS: PREACHING CHIEFLY
CONVERSION NARRATIVES

Chiefly converts who struggled with beleaguered borders and recalcitrant womenfolk and youth drew upon the Nazaretha Church’s preaching practices to bolster their authority. While these chiefs disliked the unsettling effect of roving religious itinerants, they also recognized the value of the Church’s rhetorical practices, combined with its willingness to validate ‘traditional’ authorities. Key annual meetings provided chiefs with an opportunity for frequent and heavily attended narrative performance before their subjects. At these events, chiefly elites preached on their testimonies, narrating their conversion as a spiritual defeat at the hands of the

⁵⁰ SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Application by Chief Magemegeme to Magistrate Mtunzini for school site, 4 Dec. 1938.

⁵¹ SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Chief Native Commissioner to SNA, 25 Jan. 1940.

⁵² SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Native Commissioner Mtunzini to Chief Native Commissioner, 23 August 1939.

⁵³ Chief Pewula Mchunu in Estcourt had to apply to a reluctant Native Affairs Department for permission every time he left his duties to visit Ekuphakameni: interview with Induna Khulupheyi, eMdubuzweni, Mooi River, KwaZulu-Natal, 24 Aug. 2008.

⁵⁴ M. Gerhard, *An Appetite for Power: Buthelezi’s Inkatha and South Africa* (Johannesburg, 1987).

all-powerful prophet. This was an inversion of the militaristic motif of secular chiefly praises: rather than their conquest of territories and subjects, political elites narrated how they were 'defeated' by Shembe. As a result of this, chiefs could recount stories to their subjects in which they cast themselves as divine agents and depicted their political constituencies as spiritual fellowships. To the end of commanding obedience from their subjects-cum-fellow believers, chiefly elites told cautionary tales that exhorted unruly early twentieth-century subjects to loyal patriotism as a spiritual virtue.

Convert chiefs hosted large Nazaretha meetings within their wards, events which enabled lengthy performance of religious oratory. Meetings were several-week-long, annual preaching events held at temples throughout the region, and attended by Shembe and his itinerant followers. Furthermore, temples were frequently built upon land that chiefly converts had made available to the Church within their wards. For example, the Church's strong Zululand presence by the 1920s was largely because several local chiefly converts – with more access to land than their Natal counterparts – donated substantial land to Isaiah, and later Johannes, leading to the erection of the large temples of Judea, Gibizisila, Velabahleka, Nelisiwe, and Mikhaideni.⁵⁵ These temples were usually built in close proximity to the chiefly homestead. For example, in 1958, the Nazaretha temple of eMzimoya ('Places of Winds') in the Msinga district was built within the precincts of the royal homestead of the Mchunu chief, Simakade.⁵⁶ Meanwhile, the travelling meeting, hosted by the chief himself, came to be known as 'the chief's meeting' (*Umhlangano wamakhosi*). The largest of these was started in the 1920s at Judea temple, in the ward of Chief Magemegeme Dube of Mthunzini district in Zululand (built near the Dube royal homestead). Thousands of believers travelled to this meeting every October, affording Chief Magemegeme the opportunity to 'host' the several-week-long preaching event.

While part of the meeting was made up by Shembe and his travelling retinue, these sermon events offered chiefs large audiences composed mainly of their subjects. Conversion to the Church mobilized entire 'tribal' constituencies rather than atomized individuals; chiefs would convert alongside their subjects.⁵⁷ Isaiah is said to have called chiefs the 'gates' to the people: if he could gain chiefly converts, then their subjects would be more likely to follow. In the 1940s, the vast majority of subjects of the convert chief of the Qwabe in Maphumulo district, Mavuthwa Gumede, were also members of

⁵⁵ Land-rich Zululand chiefly converts – such as the Biyela, Hlabisa, Mkhwanazi, Mzimela, and Dube chiefs – granted land to the Church, resulting in greater numbers of converts. In the 1940s, Zululand districts such as Empangeni and Mthunzini, with large temple sites donated by chiefly converts, boasted 2,000 church members. By contrast, Natal's land-squeezed chiefs had much smaller congregations. In the 1950s, congregations within a Natal district were rarely over 200. SAB, NTS, 1431, 24/214, Report on Branches of the Church of Nazareth, Oct. 1949.

⁵⁶ Interview with Inkosi Simakade Mchunu, Nhlalakahle, emaChunwini, KwaZulu-Natal, 12 September 2008.

⁵⁷ In Rhodesia, chiefs and their subjects together embraced Methodism. F. Muzorewa, 'Through prayer to action: the Rukwadzano women of Rhodesia', in T. Ranger (ed.), *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa* (London, 1975), 259.

the church.⁵⁸ In the case of Melmoth district in Zululand in the 1940s, the 379
 Biyela chief, Nkombisi Biyela, was a member of the Church, and so too were 380
 the bulk of his subjects. However, the Zulu chief in Melmoth was not a 381
 member of the Church, and there were almost no converts to be found in that 382
 district.⁵⁹ The influence could also go the other way: constituencies that were 383
 hostile to the Church pressurized their chiefs not to convert, as was the case 384
 with Chief Mfene of the Ndwedwe district in the 1920s.⁶⁰ The affinity between 385
 a chief's chosen church and the spiritual loyalties of his subjects meant that 386
 regional meetings were peopled by believers who were simultaneously 387
 political subjects of the hosting chief. 388

In this way, regional meetings provided a platform for political elites to 389
 address their constituencies. Often it was the chief himself who preached to 390
 the meeting: traditionally, the hosting chief would deliver the last sermon of 391
 a meeting held in his ward.⁶¹ If not the chief himself, narrators of sermons at 392
 these large regional meetings were influential figures within the chieftaincy. 393
 For example, in the 1970s, a respected Nazaretha storyteller and preacher 394
 was the praise poet of the Mzimela chief, Phemba Mzimela, who was himself 395
 a member of the royal family.⁶² From the 1950s onwards, Azariah Mthiyane 396
 of the Mthunzini district doubled up as both the *imbongi* of the Mbonambi 397
 chief, Manqamu, and a Nazaretha chronicler, crafting historical narratives 398
 about his chief's conversion to the Church.⁶³ These elite Nazaretha preachers 399
 and historians were not only men. One of the most senior storytellers in the 400
 Msinga district was MaDhlomo, a well-known convert from the 1920s. She 401
 was also a member of the Mchunu royal family, having married the chief's 402
 brother in the early 1930s.⁶⁴ 403

As well as spoken preaching, these storytelling elites created written re- 404
 cords of their narratives, elevating stories of chiefly conversion to canonical 405
 status. These texts were not only important documents within Nazaretha 406
 sacred scriptures but were also significant regional political histories. In 407
 1949, as part of the Church's efforts to legitimate its status as an institution 408
 with a codified, formal body of writings, Johannes had appointed an official 409
 Church archivist, Petros Dhlomo, to type out and store believers' accounts of 410
 his father, Isaiah.⁶⁵ Numerous believers, including a number of chiefs and 411
 members of their royal families, travelled to Ekuphakameni to deposit their 412
 conversion stories in written form.⁶⁶ From the 1960s, Johannes and Dhlomo 413

⁵⁸ 'It is taken for granted that any member of the Qwabe clan, literate or illiterate, should become a member of this Church': Sundker, 'Chief and prophet', 282.

⁵⁹ SAB, NTS 1431, 24/214, Report of District Commandant to Deputy Commissioner, South African Police, 17 November 1942.

⁶⁰ Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Early Regional Traditions*, 78–9, Testimony of Shayimthetho Ngidi.

⁶¹ Private correspondence with Nkosinathi Sithole, 28 Aug. 2008.

⁶² Gunner, 'Ukubonga', 121.

⁶³ Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Early Regional Traditions*, 226–32, Testimonies of Azariah Mthiyane.

⁶⁴ Interview with Bongi Mchunu, emaChunwini, KwaZulu-Natal, 25 June 2008.

⁶⁵ Dhlomo's record of the story of his appointment as archivist is found in I. Hexham and G. C. Oosthuizen, *The Story of Isaiah Shembe, Vol. I: History and Traditions Centered on Ekuphakameni and Mount Nhlankakazi* (Lewiston, 1999), xii, Testimony of Petros Dhlomo.

⁶⁶ Dhlomo's archive was published by the Edwin Mellen Press in four volumes.

circulated selected tradition from the archive among believers in the form of 414
 photocopied, stapled booklets. These informal texts included many stories 415
 of chiefly conversion, traditions that had been narrated to the archivist by 416
 either the chief himself or his pious subjects.⁶⁷ The circulation of these texts 417
 elevated chiefly conversion narratives to part of a Nazaretha corpus of sacred 418
 texts, and also created a wide popular readership for the stories. 419

Chiefly conversion traditions were also committed to writing by regional 420
 ‘archivists’ and historians. Amos Qwabe of the Maphumulo district, a 421
 member of the Qwabe royal family, was also a devout believer of the 422
 Nazaretha Church. Writing as both a Qwabe patriot and a pious convert, in 423
 about the 1950s, Amos produced a lengthy history of the conversion of the 424
 Qwabe chiefs to the Church.⁶⁸ Amos’s text was stored by him at home and, 425
 while it is not clear what performance life his textual history would have had 426
 (if any), his act of ‘archiving’ chiefly histories in textual form seems to have 427
 been a means of codifying their significance. From about the 1970s onwards, 428
 regional believers also used tape-cassette recorders to create lasting records 429
 of stories of their chiefs’ conversions. MaDhlomo, the respected female 430
 historian of the Mchunu chieftaincy, had many of her sermons recorded 431
 by attendant members of the congregation, forming a permanent ‘archive’ of 432
 the conjoined history of the Mchunu royal family and the Church.⁶⁹ These 433
 tape recordings would have been frequently replayed. Repeated acts of 434
 listening to historical narratives of how Isaiah converted their Mchunu 435
 chief were both a profession of faith and also a catechism of identity as 436
 rehabilitated Nazaretha patriots. 437

In these ‘canonical’ story traditions – circulating in spoken sermons, 438
 codified in textual form, and preserved in audio recordings – royal converts 439
 used older vocabularies of chiefly authority to narrate new forms of political 440
 thought to their subjects. These narrators used militaristic idioms of 441
 journeying and conquering, not to celebrate their own control over bounded 442
 territories, in the style of secular chiefly praises, but rather to describe their 443
 own spiritual ‘defeat’ at the hands of Isaiah. Chiefs’ conversion narratives 444
 typically described their rebuke by the prophet, and his command to them 445
 that they relinquish aspects of their old life connected with a degenerate 446
 social order. 447

A rich example of this type of narrative is the conversion story of the 448
 elderly Mchunu chief, Simakade, of the Msinga district.⁷⁰ In September 449
 2008, at his royal homestead of Nhlalakahle in the Msinga district, Simakade 450
 related the story of his conversion to me. Although this was a private, one- 451
 on-one recounting – that is to say, a context with no ‘performance life’ – this 452
 tradition is part of a frequently performed Mchunu–Nazaretha corpus of 453

⁶⁷ For example, Mthembeni Mpanza’s informally published biography of Isaiah Shembe – *UShembe NobuNazaretha* – first began circulating among members in the early 1980s. It contained various narratives of Isaiah’s evangelizing among chiefs.

⁶⁸ I was told about this text by Minister Khuzwayo of the Maphumulo district. Amos Qwabe also related Qwabe chiefly conversion stories to Petros Dhlomo: Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Early Regional Traditions*, 107–20, Amos Qwabe.

⁶⁹ The tapes belong to Evangelist Khumalo, eMdubuzweni, KwaZulu-Natal.

⁷⁰ Simakade’s great age – he was 85 in 2009 – and his prestige as a ‘hereditary’ chief make him one of the most respected chiefly converts.

stories.⁷¹ Indeed, Simakade's narration was seamlessly delivered, reflecting the practised narration of his conversion story. It was also a story that Simakade considered sufficiently 'canonical' to store in the central archive at Ekuphakamani. The second source used here for the chief's conversion narrative is a text that he deposited in typewritten form with Petros Dhlomo, after his conversion in 1957.⁷²

Simakade's conversion narrative describes how he was overcome – indeed, 'defeated' – by the superior powers of Johannes Shembe. Simakade described how his mother, MaNgubane, the first wife of his father, Chief Muzocitwayo, had joined the Church in the early 1930s, during Isaiah's missionary visit to the region.⁷³ However, in the 1940s, he and the other young men of the royal family were reluctant to embrace the Church's strict discipline. Simakade remembers that they said to themselves:

Well, we do hear what Shembe is saying, but his message is for the older people. It has got rules that prevent a person from enjoying life. So we were saying that we would believe when we were old, but we were lying!⁷⁴

Chief Simakade's conversion story goes on to describe his defeat by Shembe's miraculous powers. In 1955, he fell seriously ill.⁷⁵ His second narrative, from the Church archivist Dhlomo's collection, recounts how, in desperation, his devout mother broke Church laws against the use of medicine by summoning a ritual healer. But this doctor had no success. In January 1956, MaNgubane arranged for her chiefly son to be taken to Shembe. On the way to Ekuphakamani, suddenly, by miracle, Shembe, the 'Lord', appeared before them on the road. Simakade related what happened:

The Lord assembled all our mothers and reproved them for administering me with medicine ... Then he turned to me and asked me whether I would like to be the chief of the amaChunu. I said, 'Yes.' 'Why then did you use medicine?' I did not know what to answer. He asked, 'Did the medicines make you chief?' I replied, 'No, our Father.' Then he said I should never use medicines again if I wanted to be the chief of the amaChunu tribe. By this conversation I was healed and I chose the Lord of Ekuphakamani. Amen.⁷⁶

Simakade's conversion narrative depicts him to his listening and reading subjects as subdued by Shembe's powers. This contrasts sharply with older, nineteenth-century narratives of Mchunu chiefly authority. The Mchunu

⁷¹ At the 2008 eMzimoya meeting, I was told of the chief's powerful testimonial preaching at the 2007 meeting.

⁷² I. Hexham and G. C. Oosthuizen, *The Story of Isaiah Shembe, Vol. III: The Continuing Story of the Sun and Moon* (Lewiston, 2002), 130–40, Testimonies of Simakade Mchunu.

⁷³ NAB, 1/MSG 3/1/1/1, Native Commissioner Msinga to Chief Native Commissioner, 9 Jan. 1934.

⁷⁴ Interview with Inkosi Simakade Mchunu.

⁷⁵ Themes of sickness and healing by Shembe dominate the majority of Nazareth chiefly conversion accounts. For Nyuswa chiefs, see Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story of Isaiah Shembe*, I, 83–6, Testimony of Daniel Dube. For Dube chief, see interview with Inkosi yakwaDube, Ebhuleni, KwaZulu-Natal, 9 July 2008. For Mzimela chief, see Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story of Isaiah Shembe*, I, 196–9, Testimony of Jiniose Mzimela.

⁷⁶ Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Continuing Story*, 131–2, Simakade Mchunu.

chiefs had long drawn upon militaristic idioms of warfare to account for their legitimacy as rulers. The praises of Simakade's great-great-grandfather, Chief Macingwane, described his rule through military valour and cunning. Macingwane was a 'croucher like a beast sneaking into a maize field', and an 'indolent one who eats the corn of the diligent ones'.⁷⁷ In contrast, Simakade, Macingwane's descendant, describes in his conversion story – a new narrative genre of political power and legitimacy – how he is defeated by the power of the 'Lord of Ekuphakameni', subsequently relying upon him alone to fashion his chiefhood.

Clearly there were political advantages behind chiefs' willingness to narrate themselves to their subjects as defeated by the power of Shembe. Simakade's conversion story describes how, in return for his obedience, Johannes offered him moral approbation of his rule. Sermons frequently describe how Isaiah prophesied the chief's reign, pronouncing that Simakade would be 'the chief I have brought back from the sands of the sea!'⁷⁸

The conversion traditions of the Mbonambi chief demonstrate a similar moral weight being given to secular authorities who embraced the Church. In the 1960s, Azariah Mthiyane – *imbongi* of the Mbonambi chief of the Empangeni district of Zululand, as well as Nazaretha historian – narrated the following story to Dhlomo:

Then the Mbonambi chief sent a message inviting [Isaiah] Shembe to his residence, because they had never seen each other ... When they had met, Chief Manqamu Mbonambi allocated Shembe the site for the building of the village of Mikhaideni. The chief Manqamu praised Shembe and said, 'It is said that you are a pastor like others, but are you not God?' ... The Lord [Shembe] thanked him and said, 'I thank you, because you have seen me. Therefore you will walk as a great man, and the people will respect you until you will be drawn on a skin [that is, until you die]. God will extend the days of your life here on earth until you go home as an old man.'⁷⁹

Mthiyane's story describes how the two figures – chief and prophet – entered into an alliance of mutual recognition. Chief Mbonambi asked if Isaiah was not 'God' himself and, as a mark of his spiritual esteem of the prophet, allocated him a site, Mikhaideni, for Shembe's work in his ward.⁸⁰ In return, Shembe offered the chief moral approbation of his standing – 'you will walk as a great man, and the people will respect you'. If chiefs recounted their submission to Isaiah as narrative, they could then cast themselves to their followers as divinely legitimated.

⁷⁷ Cope, *Izibongo*, 130–1. For the militaristic character of the Mchunu chiefdom, see Webb and Wright, *James Stuart Archive*, II, 89; NAB 1/MSG 3/1/1/1, Compilation report by various magistrates about Mchunu violence in Msinga, Sept. 1940.

⁷⁸ Interview with Simakade Mchunu. I also heard the same tradition in a sermon preached by Minister Mthembu, eMzimoya, emaChunwini, 30 Aug. 2008.

⁷⁹ Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Early Regional Traditions*, 228–9, Testimony of Azariah Mthiyane.

⁸⁰ An eyewitness account from the 1930s reported that the convert Nyuswa chief 'treated Shembe with the greatest respect and endorsed his esteemed position': E. Gunner, 'Keeping a diary of visions: Lazarus Phelalasekhaya Maphumulo and the Edendale congregation of amaNazaretha', in Barber, *Africa's Hidden Histories*, 164.

Isaiah espoused a return to *ukuhlonipha* as a means of enhancing chiefly authority, with respect for chiefs being advertised as a religious obligation. An undated text records a sermon that he delivered to an outlying congregation, instructing them to obey their chiefs (*amakhosi*): 'You should not love the amakhosi only when you see their faces, but you should love them with your hearts. Even when the amakhosi say to you that you should pay tax money you ought not to be angry.'⁸¹

The Church's practice of *ukuhlonipha* made it the envy of chiefs across the region: Sundkler describes how in the 1940s he met a 'young heathen chief who told me that he had come to the prophet's place, not in order to become a Nazarite, but to study the ways of imposing *ukuhlonipha* on his people'.⁸² Advocating *ukuhlonipha* as a religious virtue could translate into tangible political benefits. For example, contemporary accounts described how Isaiah taught that membership of a trade union was a sin, instructing Nazaretha believers to publicly burn their red membership cards.⁸³ Chiefs have continued to recognize the Church's espousal of *ukuhlonipha* into the twenty-first century. The current chief of the Dube people, whose grandfather, Chief Magemegeme, first joined the church in the 1920s, confirms this:

There are people in this church who are older (than me), but even though I'm young – I'm not sixty yet – they respect me, they salute me, because of the position that I'm holding. So all of that makes me believe that I should follow Shembe. There are so many good things that Shembe does.⁸⁴

The Nazaretha Church not only lauded chiefs as divinely appointed political authorities but also positioned them as high-ranking figures within the Church, placing them higher than even the most senior minister. When he founded Ekuphakameni in 1914, Isaiah was said to have established a special gate for his hoped-for chiefly converts to enter by, so that they would not have to mingle with commoners.⁸⁵ Isaiah and subsequent leaders of the Church ensured that chiefs who chose to convert received full honours. During Nazaretha services, they were given a special area to sit in and could sit on chairs, like Shembe, while ordinary Nazaretha (including highly ranked ministers) were seated on grass mats on the floor. Within Ekuphakameni, chiefs had their own cordoned-off area for their *dokodo*.⁸⁶ In the 1940s, Sundkler found that during the annual meeting Johannes ensured that chiefs had a 'private full-day session' with him, to discuss not only religious matters but also the 'whole net of legislative enactments that descends upon chief and people'.⁸⁷ A visitor to Ekuphakameni in the 1930s reported that the Nyuswa chief's arrival to the holy village was greeted with great ceremony.⁸⁸

Although chiefly converts found that recasting their authority in a divine mould afforded significant benefits, they were reluctant to relinquish their

⁸¹ Hexham, *Scriptures*, 17. The text was created by an unnamed scribe.

⁸² Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 111.

⁸³ *Natal Mercury*, 27 July 1927; Gunner, 'Testimonies', 101.

⁸⁴ Interview with Inkosi yakwaDube.

⁸⁵ R. Papini and I. Hexham, *The Story of Isaiah Shembe, Vol. IV: The Catechism of the Nazarites and Related Writings* (Lewiston, 2002), 202, Testimony of Timothy Kuzwayo.

⁸⁶ The small, one-room dwellings that Nazaretha lived in during the annual meeting at Ekuphakameni.

⁸⁷ Sundkler, 'Chief and prophet', 281.

⁸⁸ Gunner, 'Keeping a diary', 164.

secular narratives of legitimacy entirely. Convert chiefs had to negotiate 568
 complex double identities, and, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, 569
 Nazaretha chiefs were key figures within the KwaZulu homeland political 570
 economy, as well as senior figures within the Church. In particular, the Qadi 571
 chief, Mzonjani, was both a prominent IFP official and a key Nazaretha 572
 patron, having granted Amos Shembe the land upon which the new church 573
 centre of Ebuhleni was built in 1982.⁸⁹ Chiefly converts such as the Qadi 574
 ruler attempted to maintain prestige by staying aloof from the many 575
 Nazaretha ritual observances: they insisted that they still could smoke, 576
 drink, shave their beards, eat pork, and keep dogs.⁹⁰ As one member of the 577
 Qadi chieftaincy, also a Nazaretha convert, commented in the 1950s: 578
 ‘chiefs ... are like gods, and cannot be expected, nor are they able to conform 579
 to the regulations made for laymen’.⁹¹ 580

When they could, chiefly converts continued to have their ‘secular’ praises 581
 recited.⁹² The elderly Mzimela chief Zimema, of the Ngoye region of 582
 Zululand, joined the Church in the period of Isaiah Shembe.⁹³ His successors 583
 in the chieftaincy – his son, Ntshidi, and his grandson, Lindelihle, who was 584
 chief in the 1970s – were also members of the Church. All three continued to 585
 have their ‘secular’ praises recited at weddings, court hearings, and meetings 586
 of chief’s councillors.⁹⁴ The praises of the convert Mzimela chiefs describe 587
 their chiefly authority through typical images of bellicosity, warfare, and 588
 quarrelling. The elderly Zimema is described as a great warrior: ‘The 589
 Black Sheep which defeated the *bheshu*-makers ... Steady-stalker-and-grab- 590
 him ... (the) Swift One who went ahead.’⁹⁵ His chiefly son, Ntshidi, is a ‘Tall 591
 Deep-Chested One, the old bull, catcher of two bulls’;⁹⁶ while Lindelihle is 592
 praised as a ‘Stiff-stander ... hewer of great trees’.⁹⁷ The ongoing perform- 593
 ance of convert chiefs’ praises – with their concomitant virtues of militarism 594
 and warfare – points to the diverse range of legitimating narratives that 595
 twentieth-century authorities were willing to utilize. 596

The chiefs’ determination to maintain a degree of political independence 597
 was matched by Shembe leaders’ efforts to display their moral superiority to 598
 their chiefly converts. Isaiah was frequently reported to ‘show his authority 599
 by keeping important chiefs waiting for days’ when they came to interview 600
 him.⁹⁸ He, and subsequent leaders of the Nazaretha Church, depicted 601
 their reign as morally superior to the political might of the chiefs. During the 602

⁸⁹ *Mail and Guardian*, 13 Oct. 1995.

⁹⁰ J. Fernandez, ‘In the precincts of the prophet: a day with Johannes Galilee Shembe’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 5:1 (1973), 40.

⁹¹ Vilakazi, *Shembe*, 58–9.

⁹² The praises for the Dube, Mkhwanazi, and Biyela chiefs – all Nazaretha converts – continued to be recited in the twentieth century. Gunner and Gwala, *Musho!*, 127–9, 134–7, 145–9, 155.

⁹³ Mzimela (1841–1939) was a steward of the last independent Zulu king, Cetshwayo. Gunner and Gwala, *Musho!*, 140; Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story of Isaiah Shembe*, I, 197–9, Testimony of Jinirose Mzimela.

⁹⁴ Gunner, ‘Ukubonga’, 131.

⁹⁵ Zimema’s praises celebrate his role in the great battle between British and Zulu at Isandlwana in 1879.

⁹⁶ Ntshidi’s praises describe his frequent family ‘quarrels’. Gunner and Gwala, *Musho!*, 46, 138–41.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 138–9.

⁹⁸ Roberts, ‘Shembe’, 38.

1935 pilgrimage to Mount Nhlankakazi, Shembe told the listening congregation that, while they should respect their chiefs, nonetheless they should remember that ‘the “horn” to anoint the chiefs is with us at Nontandabathakathi [the homestead of Shembe’s grandfather, Mzazela]’.⁹⁹ Particularly during the violence of the 1980s, the Church sought to maintain its independence from secular politics. Although Chief Gatsha Buthelezi was a frequent visitor to Ebuhleni throughout the 1980s, the Nazaretha Church resisted depiction as the ‘spiritual wing’ of Inkatha.¹⁰⁰

Despite these mutually felt tensions, however, these twentieth-century chiefs recognized that Nazaretha rhetorical performance afforded them opportunities to preach obedience to their subjects as a sacred obligation; as we have seen, they used their conversion testimonies to this end. Disciplines of narrative preaching also provided chiefs a vocabulary with which to cast their political opponents as ‘sinful’. When Isaiah arrived in the Maphumulo region in about 1914,¹⁰¹ the Qwabe chieftaincy was in a state of disrepair. Its involvement in the Zulu Rebellion of 1906 had led to the government’s deposition of the Qwabe royal family and the appointment of a Ngubane as acting head.¹⁰² Qwabe chiefly tradition casts the rival Ngubane chief as the enemy of God, and also recounts his ‘defeat’ by Isaiah. In traditions still circulating in the present-day Church, Qwabe–Nazaretha historians describe how Isaiah restored power to the royal lineage. Minister Khuzwayo, who is the minister in charge of the Qwabe ward in Maphumulo today, described to a listening congregation at eMthandeni temple (itself situated a few hundred metres away from the Qwabe royal homestead) that, upon arriving, Isaiah declared to the royal family that ‘I am sent by God to come here and return the chieftaincy to the sons of the chief.’ The minister’s sermon narrated how Isaiah engineered an incident whereby the Ngubane chief fell from favour in the government’s eyes, and ‘so the land was returned to the hands of Meseni, as the prophet had said’.¹⁰³ Chiefly converts also used preaching to legitimate themselves within familial disputes. For example, to combat his brother’s rival claim to the chieftaincy, the current Mchunu chief, Nduna, frequently narrates how Johannes Shembe came to him in a dream and commissioned him alone to lead the Mchunu.¹⁰⁴

In addition to denouncing chiefly rivals, political authorities also used their conversion stories as a means of condemning anti-social forces within

⁹⁹ Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Story of Isaiah Shembe*, I, 234–5, ‘Testimony of Aaron Mthethwa.’

¹⁰⁰ *Ilanga laseNatal*, 11–13 Jan. 1996; Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos, ‘Violence au KwaZulu-Natal’, *Afrique Contemporaine*, 180 (1996), 95–7; R. Papini, ‘Dance uniform history in the Church of Nazareth Baptists: the move to tradition’, *African Arts*, 37 (2004), 90 n. 9.

¹⁰¹ Isaiah’s praises describe his arrival in Qwabe territory: ‘The News came down from Sinothi/Reaching out to Ntabazwe/Until it landed at eMthandeni in Maphumulo’ (personal copy of praises).

¹⁰² NAB 1/MPO 3/1/1/5, Magistrate Maphumulo to Chief Native Commissioner, 1919.

¹⁰³ Interview with Minister Khuzwayo, Maphumulo, KwaZulu-Natal, 9 Oct. 2008. The chieftaincy did return to the Qwabe royal family in 1919: see NAB 1/MPO 3/1/1/5, Magistrate Maphumulo to Chief Native Commissioner, 1919.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Inkosi Nduna yakwaMchunu, eMdubuzweni, 24 Aug. 2008.

the boundaries of their chieftaincies. Unruly subjects were cast as evil forces. 638
 In the 1960s, Chief Simakade of the Msinga district personified the endemic 639
 fighting of the district as a 'demon' stalking his land that only Shembe could 640
 quiet.¹⁰⁵ The chief related a story to the Church archivist: 641

I was suffering from faction fights in our tribal area. In one year, I ordered all the 642
 people to pay one shilling each. I brought this offering to Shembe and said that my 643
 tribe had sent me to cry for this state of war. The Lord Shembe told me to put all 644
 the money into the offering basket. Thereafter it was calm in Mchunuland for five 645
 years. And when this demon waked again, I always went to the Lord to report it. 646
 Then the fighting would stop.¹⁰⁶ 647

Contemporary Nazaretha chiefs continue to use storytelling to make claims 648
 upon their subjects' loyalty. Today, as in the early decades of the twentieth 649
 century, the Mchunu chieftaincy struggles to assert its authority over recal- 650
 citrant subjects. The royal house is attempting to claim restitution of large 651
 amounts of land lost during the colonial era. However, ordinary Mchunu 652
 communities are making their own, counter-claims, questioning the chief's 653
 right to customary land ownership.¹⁰⁷ Relations between the post-apartheid 654
 government and the Mchunu chieftaincy are fraught: the Mchunu royal 655
 family feels undermined by party-loyal municipal authorities, and maintains 656
 that the 'democratic' constitution affords inadequate recognition to tra- 657
 ditional authorities.¹⁰⁸ In this uncertain contemporary environment, chiefly 658
 converts continue to recount affirmations of chiefly power in services. 659
 Regional sermon-tellers work hard to emphasize that the Mchunu chief's 660
 rule is divinely appointed and blessed. In 2008, a minister at the annual 661
 meeting of the Msinga district, hosted by the Mchunu chief, proclaimed to 662
 hundreds of gathered subjects of the chief: 663
 664

I wish the Lord may help us increase the days of the Mchunu chief. We are happy 665
 to be ruled in a place like this. God loves him, this chief of ours! 666
 667

Whole congregation cries 'Amen'.¹⁰⁹ 668

The minister urged subjects to obey their chief, who had decreed 669
 Nazaretha laws over all his subjects, believers and non-believers alike. 670
 Mchunu subjects were commanded to keep the Sabbath, which involved 671
 abstaining from work and from lighting any type of fire. Further, in espousal 672

¹⁰⁵ Clegg, 'Ukubuyisa Isidumbu'. Isaiah attributed 'faction fights' to lack of adherence to religious principles: see Roberts, 'Shembe', 80.

¹⁰⁶ Hexham and Oosthuizen, *Continuing Story of the Sun and the Moon*, 137. Testimony of Simakade Mchunu.

¹⁰⁷ Department of Land Affairs, Land Claims, Pietermaritzburg, 29 Sept. 2008, Nngongolo Claim Reference Number: KRN 6/2/2/E/10/0/0/20 and 45.

¹⁰⁸ Other Nazaretha chiefs share this view. Interview with Inkosi MaKhumalo Ndaba, Ntambamhlope, Estcourt, KwaZulu-Natal, 1 July 2008; interview with Inkosi yakwaDube. See also D. I. Ray, T. Quinlan, K. Sharma, and A. Owusu-Sarpong (eds.), *Re-inventing African Chieftaincy in the Ages of Aids, Gender and Development, Volume One* (IDRC Project: TAARN, 2005), 58–77; R. Southall and Z. De Sas Kropiwnicki, 'Containing chiefs: the ANC and traditional leaders in the eastern Cape, South Africa', *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 37:1 (2003), 48–82.

¹⁰⁹ Minister Mthembu, Sabbath Morning Sermon at eMzimoya Temple, emaChunwini, KwaZulu-Natal, 30 Aug. 2008.

of 'traditional' Zulu codes of female virtue, women of his region were forbidden to wear trousers (which was also the practice of the Church). The minister asserted that those who defied Simakade's authority, and who sought refuge in the government discourse of democratic 'rights', would be punished:

Our chief has said what God wanted him to say. He was not afraid of people. Wearing trousers is not allowed in this land. These days whoever persists in wearing trousers, wears them by their own force and stubbornness – because now people have 'rights' ... Many people were stubborn, they wanted to light fire on the Sabbath. But that fire jumped, and burnt them!

Congregation cries 'Amen'.¹¹⁰

Telling stories of Mchunu subjects punished by divine wrath was, and still is, a means for chiefs to create governable communities of subjects. Narrated at large regional gatherings, these stories enabled preacher and congregation to affirm chiefly authority against those who would dispute it. Today, as in the mid-twentieth century, the narration of Shembe's miraculous power summons up communities of devout believers, converts who are also obedient chiefly subjects.

CONCLUSION

The storytelling practices of the twentieth-century Nazaretha Church offered the political authorities in Natal and Zululand new ways to tell their subjects stories about their legitimacy as rulers. The well-established praising tradition of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Zulu political culture had been – and, to some extent, still continued to be – an important narrative practice for legitimating chiefs. Throughout the twentieth century, however, the erosion of chiefly power corresponded with a decline in chiefly praise poems. During this same period, new narrative opportunities for chiefs seeking to legitimate their power before their subjects arose in the form of Nazaretha sermon performance. Chiefs used the autobiographical conversion testimony to narrate their own spiritual 'defeat' by the miraculous powers of Shembe. They told these stories to their subjects in an effort to cast themselves as divinely appointed, and to exhort their political constituencies to offer obedience to their rulers as a religious obligation.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* The present-day church praise poet Themba Masinga tells the story of two Qwabe men who repeatedly disobeyed their chief by ploughing on the Sabbath and were punished by a sudden death: T. Masinga, 'Babonani abalandela uShembe?' (private CD recording, 2008).